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Choosing “Home”: Refugee Rights to Resettlement and Secondary Migration  
in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

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United States

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The United States is on the cusp of one of the largest increases in refugee admissions in more than a decade. Ahead of this surge in arrivals, this paper provides a new analysis of current placement procedures and government data through the human rights lens, focusing on secondary migration and integration, and assesses unaddressed, long-standing deficiencies in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. It also offers recommendations for systemic changes at the local, national and international levels to incorporate increased personal agency in the resettlement process and improve outcomes in the U.S. for newly arriving refugee cohorts.

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### Acronym List

<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>ORR</b>	Office of Refugee Resettlement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
<b>PRM</b>	Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (U.S. Department of State)
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>USRAP</b>	United States Refugee Admissions Program
<b>VOLAGs</b>	Voluntary Resettlement Agencies

## Introduction

In the coming year, the United States will witness the largest increase in refugee arrivals since 2004, and with it thousands of Syrians fleeing both civil war and the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> The Obama administration directive, announced by the Secretary of State John Kerry on Sept. 20, 2015, will significantly increase the target of refugee admittances<sup>2</sup> and the country is on course to reach the 85,000 refugee ceiling by Sept. 30, 2016. The policy decision followed a summer of frequently deadly travel for refugees and economic migrants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa, toward Europe, and an exodus from Islamic State-threatened areas in Syria and Iraq to neighboring Jordan and Turkey.<sup>3</sup> But a series of coordinated, deadly attacks across Paris on November 13, 2015, and the erroneous attribution of responsibility to Syrian refugees in early media reports, triggered political backlash toward refugee resettlement throughout Europe and in the world's largest third-country recipient of refugees - the United States. Several state legislatures introduced and passed bills to thwart resettlement in their state (Rathod 2016); 31 governors voiced opposition (Seipel 2015); and the issue became even more politicized as Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump called for a ban on Muslim immigrants and Syrian refugees, citing safety concerns and allegations of terrorist connections among those fleeing violence (Diamond 2015). In this climate of political divisiveness on refugee resettlement comes the biggest back-to-back growth in nearly a decade for projected refugee arrivals in the

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<sup>1</sup> From 2003 to 2004, refugee admittances jumped from 28,403 to 52,873, a net gain of 24,470 year over year, based on data from U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center.

<sup>2</sup> 70,000 in FY2015; 85,000 in FY2016; 110,000 in FY2017.

<sup>3</sup> While in recent years the United States received only dozens of refugees annually, the country received more than 10,000 Syrians in FY2016, marking a significant uptick for arrivals.



coming two fiscal years. It is in this context that this paper will scrutinize the efforts of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

The new refugee admittance figures are a sizeable increase - the 100,000 threshold hasn't been crossed since the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> It is not an unprecedented number for the U.S.; the country regularly demonstrated in the 1970s and 1980s its capacity to absorb hundreds of thousands of people fleeing violence, war, and persecution. But the program's success in accepting 3.2 million refugees since 1975 hinges not just on political realities but administrative constraints and oversights. As recently as last year, bills introduced in Congress demanded improved accountability mechanisms, more nuanced reports, and more efficient procedures to handle a population that is increasingly diverse and more dispersed throughout the U.S.

Current U.S. resettlement policy - and that of other third-country refugee recipients - is the result of decades of standard operating procedures; it favors widespread dispersion, pushing refugees to cities and states regardless of their personal preference from coast to coast, in almost every U.S. state. This extends from an international practice that voids personal agency in country selection, creating a double-denial of choice in refugees deciding for their future. While several academic works have explored through qualitative analysis the placement and internal migration experiences of specific ethnic groups in their resettlement country, this paper will reach across the boundaries of countries of origin to create a new analysis at the national level that the current government-directed resettlement policy and the practice of restricted placement choice and geographic dispersion hinder refugee incorporation and well-being in the U.S. and supplant

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<sup>4</sup> From 2007-2009 (54% from 48,282 to 74,311); these projected ceilings for refugee admittances will be a 57% increase from 2015-2017.

personal agency; it will ultimately argue for a revised system that upholds the right to freedom of movement and supports individual or communal decision-making throughout the resettlement process.

After a brief background on refugee resettlement and decision-making in Chapter 1, this this paper will argue that the current deficiency in understanding post-resettlement refugee movement in the U.S. creates unintentional but very real barriers to refugee integration and community acceptance, consequently limiting public services, misdirecting funds, and denying refugees and the receiving communities access to information and services fundamental to improving integration outcomes and community support. Chapter 2 discusses the disadvantages created by the current placement system and the importance of resettlement location; Chapter 3 introduces secondary migration as a potential indicator for problematic resettlement placement locations; Chapter 4 argues for adapting the resettlement system toward a more holistic, long-term approach that upholds the right to freedom of movement and reframes secondary migration.

## **Chapter 1: The U.S. Refugee Program and Decision-Making in the Placement System**

The United Nations estimated there were 16.1 million refugees under UNHCR mandate in 2015<sup>5</sup>; this means on any given day there are millions of people living outside their home country due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” who are unable or unwilling to return to it. After leaving their country of origin, refugees must first seek asylum in the country to which they have

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<sup>5</sup> An additional 5.2 Palestinian refugees were under the UNRWA mandate in FY2015.

travelled, or receive refugee status, usually granted through a registration process with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Of the millions of refugees officially identified around the world, only a fraction will be chosen for relocation to a third country; it is referred to regularly as the option of last resort, when refugees cannot return home or settle permanently in the country of asylum, and it is driven by a reciprocal vetting process lead by UNHCR in which the international organization recommended an individual or family for resettlement to a receiving state, the state scrutinizes and adjudicates the case, and if affirmative, the individual or family accepts or declines the relocation.

UNHCR only refers about 1% of refugees for third-country resettlement. But approval for third-country relocation does not guarantee resettlement; the vetting process can take years, as is the case with U.S. screening. In 2015, UNHCR submitted 134,000 refugees to countries for resettlement, of which 107,100 were admitted across 27 countries.<sup>6</sup> Of those, the U.S. traditionally accepts the highest number of refugees; last year was no exception, with 69,933 people admitted as refugees, according to U.S. State Department data (UNHCR 2016).

The United States has accepted millions of refugees under various laws going back to the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 after World War II. For decades, the focus of the refugee program in the U.S. was crisis mitigation with a specific regional focus, notably European Jews at the end of World War II and Southeast Asians in the mid to late 1970s. The scope of this paper will be limited to the current U.S. refugee law, which began under President Jimmy Carter with the Refugee Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-212), introduced in the Senate as S. 643 by Sen.

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<sup>6</sup> Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the U.S. have resettlement programs, though other countries may take in refugees on an ad hoc basis.

Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA). It amended the earlier Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and set a cap of 50,000 refugees annually unless otherwise mandated by the president, who can change it for up to 12 months. The Refugee Act of 1980 codified the definition of a refugee into U.S. law by drawing largely on the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which the U.S. acceded in 1968. From 1975 - the start of the Southeast Asian refugee wave, until end-2015, the State Department counts 3.25 million refugees from an increasingly diverse range of countries.

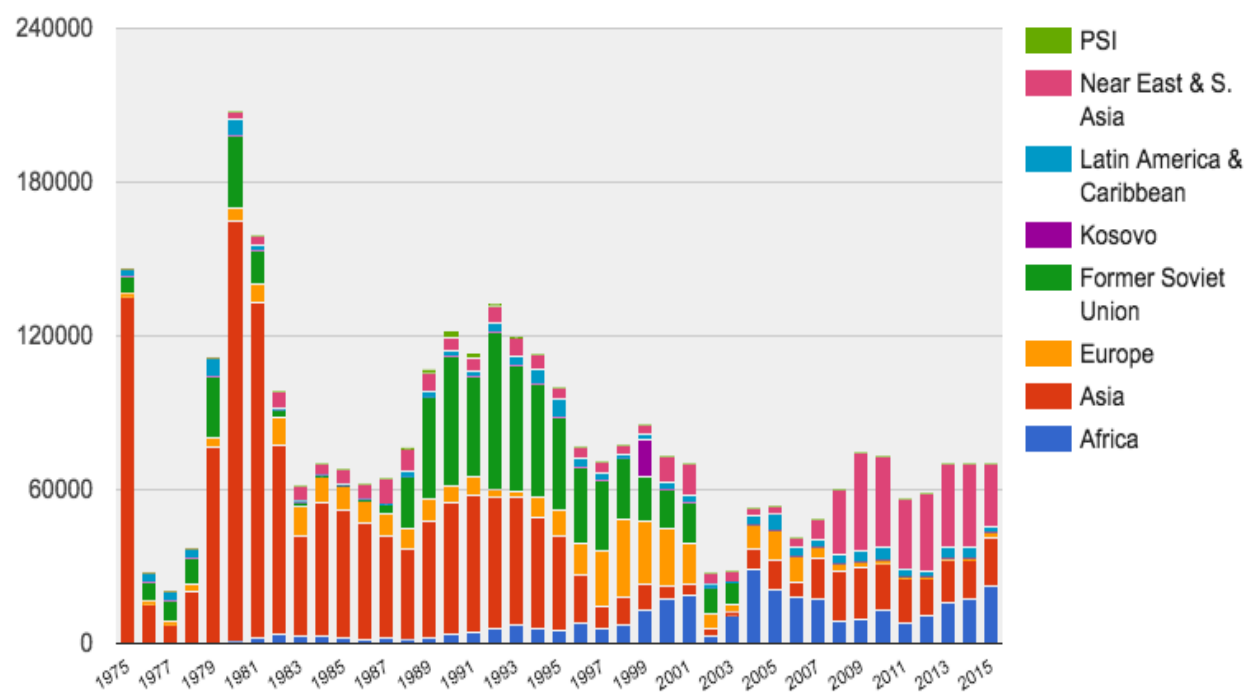


Figure 1. Refugee Arrivals to the U.S. by Region of Origin, 1975 – 2015.

(Source: U.S. State Department)

The only refugees eligible for U.S. resettlement are those referred by UNHCR or a U.S. embassy in the country of asylum. Eligibility is determined in part by a security check; after approval, a refugee must undergo a medical exam and cultural orientation; Before traveling to the U.S., a

refugee - usually entire immediate families – can spend anywhere from two months to two years in the bureaucratic decision-making and vetting process. IOM then coordinates international travel, and the U.S. provides an interest-free loan for travel. Upon arrival, refugees are placed in a location where resettlement services are available. They are immediately eligible for medical and cash assistance. U.S. government agencies in coordination with UN entities carry out the following system for refugee third-country assignment:

**Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration** suggests admissions ceilings and processing priorities to the President.

**United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees** refers cases from the country of first asylum to the U.S. for resettlement.

A refugee case file is created. **Overseas Resettlement Support Centers** interview refugee applicants to obtain biographical information, why they left their home country, and information regarding their persecution

**U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services** reviews the case file, interviews the applicants in person, and adjudicates the applications.

**Multiple U.S. government agencies** conduct security checks.

**Overseas Resettlement Support Centers** arrange medical examinations of refugees before travel with physicians approved by the **International Organization for Migration** and **U.S. Embassy**.

Refugees are assigned to one of the nine centralized **national voluntary resettlement agencies**; they also receive cultural orientation classes.

**International Organization for Migration** coordinates refugee travel; the U.S. government arranges a no-interest loan for refugees to repay travel costs.

**The Bureau of Customs and Border Protection** screens arriving refugees upon arrival.

**Office of Refugee Resettlement** administers domestic resettlement benefits.

**National voluntary resettlement agencies provide** resettlement assistance and services, and determine initial placement along with government counterparts.

*Figure 2. The Refugee Resettlement Process*

## **U.S. Obligations and Objectives in Resettlement**

The U.S. admits refugees in three groups: “Priority One” is the most well-known - individuals seeking safety from persecution for whom there is no other durable solution. “Priority Two” are the groups of “special concern” to the United States, as determined by Department of State in coordination with UNHCR, other federal agencies, and NGOs. Examples are certain persons from Cuba, Burma, and Iraq. “Priority Three” is for family reunification -- the immediate relatives of refugees who are already settled in the United States.

The first lines of the U.S. law regarding resettlement outline the program’s main objectives for refugees as “economic self-sufficiency... as quickly as possible” as well as employment training and job placement; English language acquisition follows, as well as regulations on financial assistance. Refugees are almost exclusively discussed in their capacity as part of the U.S. economy and in the context of avoiding long-term public assistance. Success is measured in annual reports to Congress by how quickly an adult refugee is employed and able to disengage from federal subsidies during the first eight months in the U.S. (Annual Reports to Congress n.d.). Legally under Article 34 of the Refugee Convention, states parties including the U.S. have an obligation to “as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees; the country also has a self-imposed commitment to leadership in refugee resettlement.”<sup>7</sup> However, while the U.S. provides a path to citizenship for refugees after five years in the country, there is no explicit commitment to integration or social support in the aforementioned law, though in reality the public-private partnership that the resettlement program has become

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<sup>7</sup> The U.S. refugee resettlement program “reflects the United States’ highest values and aspirations to compassion, generosity and leadership,” according to the State Department. (Refugee Admissions n.d.)

does account for such issues through social events, mentorship programs, mental health services, and English-language training.

Once refugees are in the U.S., public law mandates federal assistance in their resettlement. (Article 23 of the Refugee Convention and Protocol requires that states parties “shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory the same treatment with respect to public relief and assistance as is accorded to their nationals.”) Refugees receive aid from VOLAGs to find housing, work, and language training; they are expected to find work within six months of arrival, and can apply for U.S. permanent residency after 1 year; and citizenship after 5 years (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants n.d.). All refugees arriving in the United States receive a one-time stipend and are eligible for some federal benefits.

The VOLAGs are the contracting partner in executing the resettlement program. The Office of Refugee Resettlement works with nine national organizations - seven of which are religiously affiliated - which in turn coordinate with 350 local affiliate sites in every state but Wyoming. All together, the nine domestic resettlement agencies place refugees in hundreds of communities throughout the United States.

### **Decision-making and Dispersion in the Resettlement Process**

Refugee resettlement is not a right, and refugees “do not choose to be resettled or decide which country will accept them,” UNHCR explains in a brochure (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Although as in a report commissioned by the U.S. government, David A. Martin highlights that refugees may exhibit some agency in choosing to leave their country of origin, that choice all but ends once they have legally been acknowledged as refugees (Martin 2005, p. 3). Once inside the international refugee system, as operated by the United

Nations and its constituent agencies, refugees do not choose the location of their third country resettlement. Unless family ties to a country are established, the international refugee process limits refugees from exerting geographic choice. Refugees can decline a country's offer for resettlement, with the caveat that that "could jeopardize future resettlement." (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). This is the starting point for a system that to a certain extent decides refugees' futures for them - the options of remaining in a refugee camp or moving to that country are the choices presented.

Meanwhile, as refugees are in the final stages of processing abroad, in the U.S. the VOLAGs determine if, where and when it can accept the new arrivals and provide assurance as such to the Department of State. Housing, employment, needed services, readiness of the host community are principal determinants of placement location. ORR says refugees are placed in proportion to a state's population. A weekly meeting between the public and private sector stakeholders in Arlington, Virginia, assesses "country of origin, family size, names and ages, religious preference, medical needs," and "other" factors like family or other connections in the U.S. (Martin 2005, p. 76).

U.S. law codifies geographic dispersion as a resettlement policy, a practice that has been in place since the 1980s. By statute, and barring "unusual" but unspecified circumstances, the director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement is bound by the Authorization for Programs for Domestic Resettlement of and Assistance to Refugees to:

- Avoid placing refugees in areas that are already "highly impacted" by refugees or comparable populations unless the placement is for reunification of immediate family



- Provide a mechanism for local VOLAG affiliates to meet at least quarterly with state and local government officials in advance of refugee arrivals for placement coordination. And in that meeting, take into account:
  - the proportion of refugees and comparable entrants already in the area's population;
  - the availability of jobs, affordable housing, and other resources (like schools, health care, and mental health services) for refugees;
  - The likelihood of refugees placed there becoming self-sufficient and free from long-term dependence on public assistance;
  - And finally, consideration of the "secondary migration of refugees to and from the area that is likely to occur."

Initial settlement reflects the VOLAG system, rather than personal choice," observes Mott (Forrest and Brown 2014); consequently, refugees frequently must follow the established, well-worn patterns provided by the system, rather than determine their own path. International agencies and the U.S. say they attempt to keep families together by matching them up geographically; the extent to which that is successful is not made public. When refugees do not have or do not identify those relationships to refugee officials ("geo cases"), they are determined to be "free cases." Otherwise the free cases are allocated so that each VOLAG will meet its allocation for the year. Refugees who have no family in the U.S. are "sponsored" by the resettlement agency, which decides on the best match between a community's resources and the refugee's needs. As Anne C. Richard, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, explained: "We resettle refugees all across the U.S., and we don't pick

a city to be the new capital of – Little Damascus or something. Instead, we believe most parts of the United States can be a – offer a home to refugees (Richard 2015).

But what of the sense of community sought out by some groups? The Kurds have congregated in Nashville, transforming an area at the southern end of the city in Little Kurdistan. Could it work better, then, to place refugees at least where they know the environment, or feel more at ease in a community with a shared culture? Several Kurdish refugees have commented, in reporting for Voice of America, that their families were resettled in Fargo, North Dakota, and Phoenix, Arizona, but ultimately saved enough money to move to Nashville – the geographic hub of Kurdish resettlement – in part because there was a Kurdish community, but also because the rolling green hills reminded them of Iraqi Kurdistan, and fertile soil could grow the figs and pomegranates of their former lives. “We didn't choose to leave our home (in Iraqi Kurdistan). We were sort of driven out. But we really did choose to come to Tennessee,” says Kasar Abdulla, the youngest of nine children. “It’s an agriculture state,” she explained. “It reminds us of home.” The early years for her family, like for many refugee Kurds resettled in the U.S., were about surviving, when all you could bring from your old life needed to fit into a single suitcase. Finding work. Getting the kids into school. Learning English. Repaying the plane tickets from refugee camps. Then saving money for months or years to move the family to Nashville, where a growing Kurdish community was deepening its roots. “We Kurds live as a tribe,” explains Salah Osman, the imam at the local Kurdish mosque. “We have that strong relationship... it's magnetic.” (Macchi 2016, *forthcoming*). That magnetism ultimately led to a confluence of Kurdish refugee families in the Tennessee capital.

Similarly, Win La Bar, a teenager whose Burmese Karenni family followed other relatives and resettled in Phoenix, Arizona, from a Thai refugee camp, reported that having other Burmese

community members nearby helps his mother, who doesn't speak English, is illiterate in her native language, and doesn't always have her children nearby to translate or interpret for her (Macchi 2016)

Chapter 2 will explore the importance of placement for both the receiving community and the refugees in the resettlement process, and the challenges failed placement can create.

## **Chapter 2: Why Placement Matters: Challenges under the Current System**

As established in Chapter 1, refugees get placed initially in U.S. cities where they might not want to be, perhaps isolated from extended family or close friends, in an unfamiliar climate. Refugees have little to no choice in the geographic placement. In a study of African refugees in the U.S., Tamar Mott determined that “most participants... reported only being happy to be finally arriving in the U.S.” (Mott 2009). This aligns with Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, who assert that first-generation immigrants often have a “dual frame of reference” that juxtaposes their previous life before migration and their current life, leading immigrants to feel that life in the United States is markedly better than the life they left behind (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995).

But Mott, and other researchers, have also determined at the ethno-national level for a cohort, placement matters. As established by Brown and Mott, refugees will either follow their predecessors (as post-World War II Jewish refugees followed the migration patterns of other European immigrants to the U.S.) or, if among an early cohort, they will set the trend for ensuing arrivals. In 1984, a doctoral candidate in Michigan studied the previous decade of Vietnamese refugee arrivals, commented of the model of four temporary refugee camps, followed by sponsorship and placement by VOLAGs: “the initial policy of dispersing the Vietnamese, a

subsequent secondary migration and clustering has played an important role in determining the location of these later arrivals” (Case 1984). Years later, Brown and Mott would similarly note of refugee chain migration that “although refugees constitute only a portion of total immigration... their effects are disproportionately large in terms of changing the foreign born profiles of (Metropolitan Statistical Areas) and other communities, changing the fabric of society, and changing the geography of the foreign-born in all its ramifications” (Brown, Mott and Malecki 2007).

David W. Haines, who studied the earliest refugee cohorts through the 1980s and 1990s, also noted that “the specific localities in which refugees settle - only partially as a matter of choice - also affect their incorporation in terms of available housing stock, specific jobs, educational resources, and general community public opinion about them” (Haines 1997). For this reason, Case argued for premeditated placement based on refugee preference; he notes in his study of Vietnamese refugees in Michigan that “if there is a strong motivation to live with family and near friends and countrymen during an adjustment period, then care should be given to locate refugees in clusters and not to isolate them. If the primary motivation is to migrate where the jobs are located, then refugees should be placed in areas with ample job opportunities” (Case 1984).

In reports beginning in the 1980s, ethnographers and sociologists have documented several refugee cohorts in the U.S., largely concentrated on the Southeast Asia and African groups. Their findings generally do not focus on the placement process, but observations scattered throughout begin to provide a clearer picture of the challenges in a placement system driven by dispersion and authority-led decision-making. The placement system at the international and national levels generally denies personal agency, and also creates a subset of problems. Poor initial placement

has, in worst-case scenarios, led to homeless refugees, as Mott documented, strained local refugee and welfare services and inhibited integration efforts. Of innumerable but exemplary notes are the following:

*Mental health, social life, and well-being*

- In Mott's survey of African refugees in the U.S., participants suggested "good" resettlement locations; she notes that refugees placed in large cities (e.g., Atlanta, Chicago, New York and Washington, D.C.) "were unhappy with their first places of resettlement, and ended up relocation as a result. Subsequently, they noted that refugees should not be resettled in large cities because they are unaffordable, dangerous, and are not good environments to raise a family" (Mott 2009).
- "By relocating refugees to unfamiliar communities, the resettlement agencies may restrict their cultural and social opportunities as well as any ties to the refugees' past identities" (Lunn 2011, p. 834).
- As Hein notes, "prejudice and discrimination are also more serious problems for the refugees when they live in small cities rather than in big ones" (Hein 2006, p. 169). In smaller Eau Claire, the Hmong listed discrimination as their top concern, whereas in Milwaukee, it was third.
- The consequences that secondary migrants reported included social isolation, stress, and mental and physical health problems. One single mother from Sarajevo destined to Newfoundland despite her expressed preference to join a friend in British

Columbia resorted to taking sedatives in order to cope with depression (Simich, Beiser and Mawani 2003).

### *Economic health*

- In a survey of recent refugee arrivals for the “Hmong Resettlement Study” of 1984, the authors similarly identified the importance of geographic placement, noting that “There are a number of barriers that were consistently identified as impediments to effective resettlement, particularly with regard to attainment of economic self-sufficiency. Among the most commonly mentioned factors were... resettlement policies which often placed important relatives far away from one another or in poor economic environments, paving the way for later secondary migration” (Downing, et al. 1984).
- Again in Mott’s survey of African refugees, she notes that “many participants, particularly those in Columbus, maintained that their initial placements were ‘not good.’ Some, in desperate situations, chose to move to Columbus as a result, Upon arriving in Columbus, many realized they were homeless, without the resources of their initial placement, and additionally strained an overwhelmed shelter system. “The situation makes one wonder, if the initial placements by the government had been more appropriate, would social service agencies in Columbus be in the position that they are now?” (Mott 2009, p. 219)

Refugees have the right to move as soon as they land in the U.S. - and they do move, in what is termed “secondary migration” (See Ch. 3). The issues of primary placement and secondary migration raise questions about the intersection of human rights - namely the right to freedom of

movement - and the refugee resettlement process. U.S. law does acknowledge explicitly that refugees, once in the U.S., are free to move at their will<sup>8</sup> as enshrined in international treaties and conventions; but it is not upheld as a right to which the country is duty-bound.

**Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

“Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.”

**Article 26 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees**

“Each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully in its territory the right to choose their place of residence to move freely within its territory, subject to any regulations applicable to aliens generally in the same circumstances.”

**Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**

“Everyone lawfully within the territory of a State shall, within that territory, have the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence... The above-mentioned rights shall not be subject to any restrictions except those which are provided by law, are necessary to protect national security, public order (*ordre public*), public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others, and are consistent with the other rights recognized in the present Covenant.”

*Figure 3. Freedom of Movement as a Right*

Additionally, Simich, Beiser and Mawani posit in their 2003 study on resettlement in Canada, excluding refugee decision-making in the placement process can hinder acceptance for both the receiving community, and the refugees:

Balancing human rights against the need to manage refugee mobility is not only a Canadian, but also an international concern. Refugees do not always move according to bureaucratic plan.

Exercising what choice they can, many move according to an alternate plan in apparent self-interest. The settlement path is consequently altered and may be disrupted at significant cost to the refugee and to the host government. In this case, the tension between the basic human right to

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<sup>8</sup> Among other rights, like the right to work and to access education and public assistance.

move at will - embodied in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms - collides with the need to plan and provide well-organized resettlement supports (Simich, Beiser and Mawani 2003).

A report by Simich found that of 47 secondary refugee migrants in Canada interviewed for the study, “30 had expressed a preferred destination because of the presence of friends or family but were destined elsewhere.” A minority - seven - had no preference because they had no contacts in Canada. Newbold, relying on Simich’s earlier work, observed that refugees with ties to a destination will head to where “social support and interaction with members of their community, and particularly family, are greater, reinforcing Simich’s comments that refugees who are not located near family and friends are at high risk for relocation” (Newbold 2007). But if any weight is placed on refugee choice, it is not noted in USRAP reports or procedures; there is no public data from USRAP on any expressed location preference, frequency and timing of refugee relocation, but it does indicate that thousands of refugees are on the move within the first years of arriving to the U.S. Inappropriate placements can have significant consequences on communities, funding, mental health, security and finances, and can lead refugees to move elsewhere. Although Mott,<sup>9</sup> Simich, Beiser, and Mawani, resettlement officials and members of Congress highlight the burden of secondary migration, that choice to move isn’t inherently bad - it is, however, complicated, and can be financially straining for the native-born - much less for cash-strapped recent refugee arrivals, many of whom have been out of the formal labor market and education system for years. As Chapter 3 will elaborate, refugee dissatisfaction with placement location can lead to secondary migration.

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<sup>9</sup> “When initial placements are not good ones for refugees, and they are not receiving sufficient support’ some, in desperate situations, choose to move elsewhere,” echoes Mott. “This places a strain on communities that are not anticipating their arrival.” (Mott 2009)



### Chapter 3: Secondary Migration and Freedom of Movement

*“It's kind of a ghost population, because you don't really know how many people you're talking about at any point in time.”<sup>10</sup>*

*-Lewis Kimsey, Kansas State Refugee Coordinator*

Every year, tens of thousands of new refugees arrive to the U.S. And from the moment they step foot in the U.S. - though still years away from becoming citizens - they are free to move wherever they want. In the last three fiscal years for which ORR provided data for this report, the number of refugees moving within three years of their arrival has been 10,000-11,000 annually, or about 15% of the arrivals in a given year. The UN calls it “secondary migration,” and defines it as “the voluntary movement of migrants or refugees within their receiving country away from the community in which they originally resided.”<sup>11</sup> U.S. government reports and VOLAGs use the same terminology (though it can also be used in other contexts to describe migration between countries).

While U.S. refugees can, in theory, pick up and move as soon as they land in the U.S., no government or VOLAG office promotes that as an option, given the bureaucratic paperwork needed to obtain Social Security documentation, enroll children in school, access healthcare, and receive financial support in the immediate days and months following arrival to the U.S.

Refugees are incentivized to stay in the primary resettlement city, at least for 90 days, in part by

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<sup>10</sup> (Secondary Migration of Refugees: Collaborating to Ensure Community Integration, 2014)

<sup>11</sup> (The International Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology)

linking their resettlement stipend to their arrival at the primary placement location, and also by creating a system in which resettlement officials are the cultural guides and interpreters.

But in all of the choices leading up to boarding a commercial jet bound for one of the seven U.S. ports of entry, refugees have never been asked - do they want to live near more of their ethnic community members? Do they want to live in a place where they can use the skills they have already? They are required to pay for their plane tickets to the U.S., but have no agency as to where they end up. The financial burden of relocation is clear - between transportation and housing costs, even a small family is looking at potentially thousands of dollars to move between states.

While in the 1970s, Southeast Asians were first triaged through refugee camps at U.S. military bases, where they spent months, refugees are now generally greeted at the airport by VOLAG staff and escorted to a temporary apartment; from there they begin a cycle of job searching, English classes, and school for the children. In some cases, there are medical resources designated for refugees in need. But there is no claim to public health or security that restricts refugees' movement, which the ICCPR outlines as potential grounds for limitations on refugee movement. This has leading to notable cases of secondary migration, which the U.S. government delineates as a departure from the city of placement within three years of arrival in the U.S. In some reported cases, refugees have moved more than once.

## **Vietnamese Shrimpers in Florida**

In an interview for Voice of America in 2015, Dung Nguyen explained how his family – generations of fisherman from Vietnam – was placed in a camp for refugee arrivals at a north Florida U.S. Air Force base; upon leaving the camp, the family found work in Florida in the shrimping industry, because it was what they knew how to do; they stayed, and Dung continues to captain a shrimping boat much of the year. One of his crewman, however, was settled in Arkansas. His family moved themselves to the southeast because they heard there was work on the water, and other Vietnamese families. They carved out a space for themselves doing what they knew how to do, and now the first U.S.-born generation - like Dung's two sons - is opting out of the seafaring life and into professional fields, like engineering and pharmacy. They weren't sent to Florida because it was a good match, but the families knew they had a better chance of success where they already knew the skills (Macchi 2015).

*Figure 4. Choosing Florida as “Home” – A Shrimper’s Story*

Early cases of secondary migration were dramatic. A 1983 newspaper report cites an ORR official that up to 28% of the 640,000 Indochinese refugees in the country participated in secondary migration (Moritz 1983); government numbers from ORR Annual Reports for FY1980-FY1984 reflect substantial movement as well, in particular toward California. The results, according to local officials in the story, were “overcrowded schools, competition for scarce jobs, and a refugee welfare burden that increasingly falls on local, not federal, authorities.” Later in this chapter, we will review two official attempts to stanch the out-migration. But first, as Simich, Beiser and Mawani ask in a 2003 analysis of refugee well-being during early resettlement in Canada, “Why would refugees, who are by definition violently uprooted and in need of stability and support, choose to uproot themselves again?”

## **Why Refugees Move**

As discussed in Ch. 2, refugees move for jobs or family or friends; for climate or better schools; they change neighborhoods, cities and states for what they perceive will be improve conditions (Office of Refugee Resettlement 1982, p. 16); (Haines 1997). Sometimes it works, like the risk of relocating to Lewiston, Maine, that has seemingly paid off for thousands of Somalis unhappy

with their initial resettlement locations (though only after years of icy reception from the mayor) (Huisman, Hough, et al. 2011). Sometimes it fails, like in the case of secondary refugee migrants to Columbus who, without access to the services from their primary resettlement location, ended up homeless and in overburdened shelters (Mott 2009). A 1982 ORR report to Congress elaborated reasons for movement by Southeast Asian refugees: “employment opportunities, reunification with relatives, the attraction of an ethnic community, and favorable climate” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 1982).

In the U.S., the most thorough academic literature has largely concentrated on two groups of refugees: Southeast Asians who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, and Africans who arrived in the 1990s and 2000s. The studies are generally small but revelatory; for example, systemic efforts to disperse Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s “did not allow for therapeutic clustering, and many refugees were isolated, and nearly cut off from their traditional support systems. The only alternative for many refugees was to migrate to places where other family members resided or where large clusters of other Vietnamese lived” (Case 1984). The effect of this top-down decision-making is repeatedly noted in studies about the community; “Vietnamese refugees have resettled in every state and many territories of the United States. Despite the initial government attempt to disperse them throughout the country, secondary migration has led to heavy concentration of refugees in a few states,” Haines observed.

Additionally, of the 22 African refugee families surveyed for a 2011 report on intra and interstate migration, 20 reported the need for larger or cheaper housing as motivation for moving; seven moved for work reasons; a majority - 68% - cited reunification with family or community as motivation to move; neighborhood safety, school quality, and climate were also given as reasons for changing locations (Weine, et al., 2011, p. 27). In her study of Somali refugees and secondary

migration to Maine, Kimberly A. Huisman posits that quality of life choices (safety, education, housing, public assistance) and shared cultural and religious community in a small town attracted Somali refugees; she observes that job scarcity in the former mill town, however, is also pushing the same refugees away from their second U.S. home. “Having fled the violence of war and the instability of refugee camps, many Somalis were not willing to accept their placement in crime and drug-ridden neighborhoods in the US,” she notes. But “after the basic needs of safety and security are met, there is more space for their agentic orientation to shift toward the future” (Huisman 2011). The Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration at the U.S. State Department, Anne C. Richard, attributes some movement to word of mouth for job offers, which has been documented by official government and academic reports but is not the only, or even the strongest, motivator. “You will see this sort of secondary migration, which is normal and – but it’s not by design,” she explained, in a statement representative of the government rhetoric around secondary migration: we don’t want it, but we can’t stop it. “Once (refugees) come to the United States, they’re free to move. They have to stay – if they want the three months of assistance we provide to them for reception and placement in the U.S., they have to stay in one place. But after that, they’re just like Americans; they can go anywhere” (Richard 2015).

To wit, the Hmong Resettlement Study, researchers found the group used secondary migration for three reasons:

*(1) solving specific problems, such as family reunification, access to more favorable economic environments, or the resolution of factional strife between different groups of Hmong;*

*(2) providing a means to explore new settings and ways of living in the United States, e.g., developing family farms, trying rural rather than urban settings, or living in large enclaves rather than smaller, more isolated resettlement communities; and*

*(3) maintaining hope for the future through the psychological renewal experienced through experimentation and movement. (Downing , Olney, Mason, & Hendricks 1984)*

There are positive and negative inputs for and outcomes from secondary migration. The question is whether the scales ultimately lean more heavily toward one side. Simich, Beiser and Mawani noted this duality: “Secondary migration can be costly and disruptive both to the immigration and settlement infrastructure and to the refugees themselves... (S)earching for necessary social support—especially to be near family or friends—is the main reason that secondary migrants make the decision to depart from the official plans made for them.”

“We should not underestimate,” they wrote, “the significance of affirmational support and experience shared by family (immediate and extended) and friends” (Simich, Beiser and Mawani 2003).

### **Federal Oversight and the Lugar Report**

For as long as the Refugee Act of 1980 has been in place, government officials have issued annual reports to Congress, including a section on secondary migration. Early narratives about secondary migration were much more detailed and nuanced than more recent reports, which discuss secondary migration in three short, boilerplate paragraphs. The first report in 1981 for FY1980 documented secondary migration for only the Southeast Asian refugees - at the time, the largest group. California, Washington, Virginia, Texas, and Massachusetts ranked highest in net

inflow - not the total movement of individuals as later ORR reports would document. The same report observed that the "apparent large migration out of the District of Columbia deserves comment," and is likely the result of refugees finding more suitable housing in adjacent Virginia and Maryland. This era was also when the Hmong migrated to secondary cities to be part of larger communities in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Jeremy Hein notes in his study of refugee populations in four northern U.S. cities that about 40% of the Hmong population in Milwaukee arrived directly from Southeast Asia; 60% moved there from their original resettlement locations, giving the Wisconsin city "the distinction of being one of the few big cities where the Hmong chose to live" (Hein 2006).

There has seemingly been little public discussion by the agencies involved – private and public - to identify, acknowledge or address when the assigned location was ineffective, triggering secondary migration. This secondary migration has been noted in government reports dating back to the early 1980s, but is seldom the focus of published reports. In fact, in its annual report to Congress, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) devotes only three boilerplate paragraphs – repeated almost in their entirety from year to year – to secondary migration, yet allocated millions of dollars to support VOLAGs struggling with refugees who moved to an area outside their original resettlement location. An Iraqi Kurd may be resettled in North Dakota, a Somali in Atlanta, a Burmese Karenni in Arizona.

In order to "better understand the challenges confronting resettlement cities and the refugees admitted to the United States," Senator Richard Lugar, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked staff to assess the government's policies and programs for refugee admissions and resettlement. The 2010 report, "Abandonment Upon Arrival," determined that

resettlement efforts in many U.S. cities were underfunded and overburdening, which meant they also weren't meeting basic needs of refugees.

The issue of monitoring when and where refugees move after they are initially resettled in the United States, known as secondary migration, also presents a critical challenge to the backward-looking funding system. Secondary migration within the first 8 months of resettlement can create hidden populations of unsupported refugees. There is currently no system in place to transfer refugee entitlement benefits (e.g., medical insurance, housing support, welfare support) from state to state, placing a further unexpected strain on communities" (United States Senate 2010).

The report highlights how Fort Wayne, Indiana - Lugar's home state - became a "community of choice" for Burmese refugees resettled elsewhere in the U.S. City leaders estimated at the time that two secondary migrants were arriving for each refugee directly resettled in the city. The resources required to assist this flow of secondary migrants were not being directed to Fort Wayne. "The concern surrounding secondary migration is warranted because some refugee populations have proven to pose special resettlement challenges," according to the Lugar report. "Many of the more than 6,000 Burmese refugees in Fort Wayne are illiterate in their native language, have few marketable skills, and are accustomed to government dependence after being confined to refugee camps for a decade or more. The demand that they become conversant, employed, and self-sufficient within PRM's 90-day time limit was deemed 'cruel and unethical' by Dr. Jeanne Zehr, assistant superintendent of East Allen Community Schools." Lewiston, Maine, underwent a similar phenomenon with Somali refugees who, determining their original placements in major metropolitan areas - which they deemed lacking in adequate schools and job opportunities, headed north from cities like Atlanta to one of the whitest, coldest states in the lower 48 (Huisman, Hough, et al. 2011).



As indicated earlier in this paper, there is no grand unifying theory of why and how distinct refugee groups migrate; only patterns observed over time and place. In 2009 ORR commissioned a report on secondary migration, but its findings were never released. The author of the report later noted that there was a “growing interest in learning more about what was happening related to secondary refugee migration, including how both refugees and receiving communities were faring when there were unexpected influxes of refugees” (Ott 2011).

### **Attempted Fixes; Stalled Legislation**

Lawmakers have asked for improvements. Resettlement officials have asked for change. Refugees have told academics, who then published works that highlighted problems. Even ORR, in 2009, studied secondary migration specifically, but did not make the findings public. There is scant literature on the secondary migration of refugees in the U.S.; ORR is legally required to report figures to Congress annually, however there is negligible analysis.

The need for scrutiny has not gone unnoticed. A bill introduced by Rep. Peters, Gary C. [D-MI-9] in April 2011 maintains that “secondary migration is not properly tracked, and resources are not available for States and agencies experiencing high levels of secondary migration” (Rep. Peters 2011). In a bill introduced in June 2015, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) proposed an assessment of the effectiveness of domestic resettlement programs and, high on the list of issues to be studied, “technological solutions for consistently tracking secondary migration” and more assessment of assistance to secondary refugee migrants, including: “the impact of secondary

migration on States hosting secondary migrants; the availability of social services for secondary migrants in those States; and unmet needs of those secondary migrants.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Following the Money**

Secondary migration affects funding levels too; Arrival numbers for the past three years, paired with net migration for the same period, is used for the social services formula.

All refugees arriving in the United States are entitled to eight months of Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) from the date of their U.S. arrival. The amount varies based on the size of the family; families can also qualify for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) in lieu of RCA (Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigration Services of Maine n.d).

Because of how federal funding is allocated on a per person basis to refugee resettlement agencies, when refugees then choose to move, those funds do not follow them to their secondary location; if refugee services are available in their target community, the agency may not have the resources to support the refugees, straining both the VOLAG involved, resulting in underserved refugee populations who may still be entitled to and require institutional support, and catching off-guard communities that were unprepared to handle an influx of new residents.

Data obtained for this report from the Office of Refugee Resettlement for FY12-FY14 shows thousands of refugees move within the first three years. Anecdotally, however, refugees say it sometimes takes them a year or more to save the money to move on from the primary location, meaning secondary migration may in fact be much higher than currently reporting shows.

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<sup>12</sup> Sen. Stabenow, 2015; for a similar House bill narrower in scope, see: H.R.2839, “To reform and modernize domestic refugee resettlement programs, and for other purposes”

Targeted Assistance funds were distributed for the first time in FY83 “to offset the effects of spontaneous secondary migration of refugees by assistant areas where State, local and private resources have proved insufficient to meet the needs of refugees in the community” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 1983, p. 21). But according to some VOLAG and state officials, that funding is insufficient or arrives too late, despite decades of the same problem-solution combination.

Kansas has withdrawn from the federal resettlement program, however in 2014, then-state refugee coordinator Lewis Kimsey described how the state was received two and even three times as many refugees over the primary resettled population. And because in some cases it was not their first move, recuperating the money to pay for the services provided was a challenge.

*The Somali in particular, they move a lot. We've got instances where they've moved five or six times before they've come to us, which is part of the challenge... the one piece that kind of lies below the surface, if you will, is ORR only moves the money for secondary migration once. So whichever state is lucky enough to identify that individual first, as long as they identify them at all within the two-year window, are the ones that would see the social service money move.*

Kimsey also raises a point that no reports to Congress in recent years identified - trends in country of origin for migrating refugees. Understanding the demographics of refugee movement – including which nationalities or ethnicities are choosing to move more frequently, earlier, or farther – could provide answers to the effectiveness of current resettlement placements and create space for targeted programs to improve placement for future arrivals from the same group.

## **Swings and Misses**

The U.S. government did attempt, briefly, in the 1980s to understand and alter patterns of refugee migration. After extensive secondary movement by the Southeast Asian cohorts that arrived in the mid- to late-1970s and into the early 1980s, saturating most notably California with tens of thousands of new residents every year. First was the Khmer Guided Placement (KGP) project, during the second half of FY1981 and the first half of FY1982. In what officials labeled a "guided placement" pilot project, around 8,000 Cambodian refugees were resettled in 12 clusters around the U.S. "The program did have some positive effects, as it achieved a reduction in the proportion of Cambodians resettled in California, from 35 percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 1981," noted author Jacqueline Desbarats in a 1986 assessment of resettlement placement policies. "But it also had some unintended consequences. Thus, the city of Providence, Rhode Island, which was not a program participant, ended up with a Cambodian community twice as large as the largest cluster site" (Desbarats). According to an interview by the Christian Science Monitor with Kathy McCaughy, the refugee coordinator at the International Institute (then the leading resettlement agency in Providence), Cambodian communities filtered to Rhode Island from Boston and New York, where clusters had been established. "There's no reason to stay away from Providence," she told the newspaper. "Rents are less than half" than in those two larger cities.

The "Favorable Alternate Sites Project" followed two years later with the goal of reducing secondary migration "to the lowest possible level." FASP incentivized the local affiliates financially, rather than the refugees, to take in additional free-case refugees at two locations each in Arizona and North Carolina. Of the four sites, only one - Greensboro, North Carolina, saw

minimal secondary migration. The other three witnessed 27-52% out-migration. One take-away from an otherwise unrepeated pilot project was the benefit of "cluster" resettlement, which the authors called "the single most important element in the success of the FASP demonstration."

"Simply the decision to resettle free case refugees in distinct, ethnically-grouped clusters-over in a relatively short period of time... allows refugees to retain their cultural identity," the authors wrote in a reporter commissioned by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. "It gives them at least a chance at developing the type of support within the community that is particularly needed since they do not have the support of anchor relatives" (Kogan and Vencill).

### **Data and the Unknowns of Secondary Migration**

ORR publicly states that "appropriate placement and services from the onset is seen as a preventative measure against the challenges brought by secondary migration" (Office of Refugee Resettlement n.d.). But what isn't known - or at least, hasn't been made public, is who, how frequently, how soon - or long - after arrival, and why. Are refugees moving more frequently than their native-born neighbors? How long does it take them to find their most durable location home, and what is the financial cost of a delayed start in the U.S.? How can a continuity of services be provided? And how can agency and the right to freedom of movement be respected in a resettlement situation? To be clear, based on geographic mobility data from the U.S. Census Bureau for 2013-2014, 13.5% of native-born moved out of state that year, while 10% of foreign born do, whether naturalized or not (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). Immigrants were more likely (12.5%) than their native-born counterparts (9.3%) to move for a new job or job transfer, according to U.S. Census Bureau data; among the foreign-born, non-citizens - like refugees in their first five years until they have qualified for citizenship, were twice as likely (9.9%) to change residences as their immigrant citizen counterparts (4.2%).

At this author's request, ORR provided three years of aggregated secondary refugee migration data. The annual reports to Congress contain cursory summaries of secondary migration; the information found below was only available in such a format from FY12-FY14; additional written and telephone requests for disaggregated data and additional years were not fulfilled.

The bias of this data is toward more recent refugees who have moved in the past three years, which is the portion of the refugee population of exclusive interest to ORR; therefore, the data provided yields only a portion of how many refugees moved into or out of the state within three years of arrival. It does not tally how many are residing in the state, how many are newly resettled, and what the net migration is on top of those two numbers. It also excludes granular data on motivations for movement.

The data shows that there are 14 states that are consistent receivers of secondary migrants; 26 that are consistent senders of secondary migrants; and nine that are variable. This is similar to the FY80 report to Congress in which 13 states had net inflow and 29 net outflow, although the most and least popular states for refugees have changed (California, Washington state and Virginia were the leading recipients 36 years ago; DC, Tennessee and New York saw the most out-migration).

Dividing the net migration rate in a fiscal year by the number of refugees and Cuban/Haitian entrants for that year establishes a rate of secondary migration for FY12-14 of 11-13%. When compared to a General Accounting Office report from 1986 based on data from two years earlier, it reveals nominal change over three decades: 14.4% of cases studied experienced secondary migration in 1984, according to the GAO (U.S. General Accounting Office 1986).

<b>State</b>	<b>Net migration FY12</b>	<b>Net migration FY13</b>	<b>Net migration FY14</b>	<b>Sum of net migration FY12-14</b>
<b>Minnesota</b>	2,026	2,496	3,265	7,787
<b>Florida</b>	444	603	746	1793
<b>Ohio</b>	533	881	-238	1176
<b>Iowa</b>	446	381	128	955
<b>Oklahoma</b>	220	235	298	753
<b>Colorado</b>	132	211	36	379
<b>Kansas</b>	102	129	106	337
<b>Wisconsin</b>	23	76	198	297
<b>Indiana</b>	114	103	72	289
<b>Maine</b>	98	102	67	267
<b>Nebraska</b>	108	94	44	246
<b>South Dakota</b>	178	6	25	209
<b>North Dakota</b>	33	54	55	142
<b>Nevada</b>	17	5	96	118
<b>Arkansas</b>	43	-1	-4	38
<b>South Carolina</b>	52	-40	20	32
<b>Vermont</b>	13	8	10	31
<b>Delaware</b>	-2	4	7	9
<b>Washington</b>	-55	-44	98	-1
<b>Hawaii</b>	0	-1	-1	-2
<b>West Virginia</b>	-1	-4	1	-4
<b>Mississippi</b>	-3	-7	-6	-16
<b>District of Columbia</b>	-5	-3	-9	-17
<b>Alaska</b>	-2	-7	-9	-18
<b>New Hampshire</b>	-26	-13	-5	-44
<b>Rhode Island</b>	-67	-56	-34	-157
<b>Oregon</b>	-111	-37	-63	-211
<b>Kentucky</b>	-127	-113	18	-222
<b>Alabama</b>	-69	-92	-83	-244
<b>Louisiana</b>	-141	-59	-57	-257
<b>Utah</b>	-88	-81	-122	-291
<b>Tennessee</b>	-182	-133	9	-306
<b>Illinois</b>	-77	-90	-144	-311
<b>New Jersey</b>	-88	-129	-122	-339
<b>Michigan</b>	-78	-88	-200	-366
<b>Maryland</b>	-96	-144	-148	-388
<b>New Mexico</b>	-135	-156	-131	-422
<b>Virginia</b>	-85	-164	-214	-463
<b>Missouri</b>	-167	-106	-220	-493
<b>Connecticut</b>	-137	-187	-196	-520
<b>Idaho</b>	-237	-176	-173	-586
<b>North Carolina</b>	-204	-278	-319	-801

State	Net migration FY12	Net migration FY13	Net migration FY14	Sum of net migration FY12-14
<b>Massachusetts</b>	-239	-306	-387	-932
<b>California</b>	-464	-379	-119	-962
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	-280	-311	-382	-973
<b>Georgia</b>	-215	-372	-417	-1004
<b>Texas</b>	-291	-636	-362	-1289
<b>New York</b>	-410	-517	-496	-1423
<b>Arizona</b>	-494	-653	-568	-1715

*Figure 5. Net Refugee Migration, FY12-14 (ranked by three-year sum)*

(Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement)

A quick look reveals that some states, like Minnesota, are consistently pulling refugees in, while Arizona, New York and Texas are consistent in their refugee outflows. What is missing from the public data, however, is which nationalities are migrating, where and why.

The ORR method isn't flawless; as described in their reports to Congress, secondary migration is established through a system in which VOLAGs report the Social Security numbers of refugee service recipients to ORR annually;<sup>13</sup> but a 2000 memo from ORR Director Lavinia Limon specified to state and VOLAG officials that “states cannot require that applicants for ORR-funded assistance and services provide social security numbers” (Limón 2000).

Moreover, the arrival or departure of a few large families can skew outcomes in a number of states with low placement numbers. But over time, patterns emerge. When the three-year

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<sup>13</sup> (Hanh 2003): “The method of estimating secondary migration is based on the first three digits of social security numbers which the Social Security Administration assigns geographically in blocks by State. With the assistance of their sponsors, almost all arriving refugees apply for social security numbers immediately upon arrival in the U.S. Therefore, the first three digits of a refugee's SSN are a good indicator of his or her initial State of residence in the U.S. ... The supporting documentation for secondary migrants must list all secondary migrants (including refugees, entrants, and Amerasians) who have resided in the U.S. for 36 months or less and who are residents of the State on September 30. The documentation may include persons drawn from State public assistance rolls, social service provider case files, Mutual Assistance Association (MAA) lists, and other organizations.”



migration average as a percentage of arrivals is paired with the net overall net migration for that period, we see that in some cases the flow is numerically high but statistically insignificant (Florida). This also allows us to see how secondary migration compares proportionally to the level of refugee arrivals to the state that year. For example, every year Minnesota hovers in the 100-150% mark; it is receiving as many - and in some years more - refugees through secondary migration as it does through primary placement.

Below, Columns 2-4 are the percentage of Secondary Refugee Migrants (Refugee and C/H Entrants / New Refugee Arrivals) for FY12-14; Column 5 is the average of those three-year rates.

<b>State</b>	<b>FY12 Migrated percentage of ORR eligible<sup>14</sup></b>	<b>FY13 Migrated percentage of ORR eligible</b>	<b>FY14 Migrated percentage of ORR eligible</b>	<b>Three-year migration average</b>
<b>Arkansas</b>	430.00%	-14.29%	-36.36%	126.45%
<b>Minnesota</b>	116.44%	112.53%	146.28%	125.08%
<b>Oklahoma</b>	70.97%	75.56%	72.68%	73.07%
<b>Iowa</b>	102.76%	63.61%	18.47%	61.61%
<b>Delaware</b>	-40.00%	30.77%	175.00%	55.26%
<b>Maine</b>	48.28%	29.06%	17.27%	31.53%
<b>Kansas</b>	26.36%	27.22%	21.50%	25.02%
<b>Ohio</b>	23.73%	31.24%	-8.42%	15.52%
<b>South Dakota</b>	27.55%	1.13%	4.73%	11.14%
<b>Wisconsin</b>	2.90%	7.97%	17.28%	9.38%
<b>Nebraska</b>	14.03%	9.33%	4.07%	9.14%
<b>North Dakota</b>	5.95%	11.84%	9.45%	9.08%
<b>South Carolina</b>	37.41%	-25.97%	15.15%	8.86%
<b>Colorado</b>	9.02%	11.68%	1.96%	7.55%
<b>Indiana</b>	9.51%	6.68%	4.46%	6.88%
<b>Vermont</b>	3.71%	2.48%	3.15%	3.12%
<b>Nevada</b>	2.04%	0.39%	6.87%	3.10%
<b>Florida</b>	2.60%	2.20%	2.55%	2.45%

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<sup>14</sup> Eligible population counted by ORR for secondary migration includes only refugees and Cuban/Haitian entrants.

State	FY12 Migrated percentage of ORR eligible <sup>14</sup>	FY13 Migrated percentage of ORR eligible	FY14 Migrated percentage of ORR eligible	Three-year migration average
Washington	-2.54%	-1.80%	3.92%	-0.14%
Michigan	-2.17%	-1.89%	-4.98%	-3.01%
Kentucky	-6.96%	-5.05%	0.69%	-3.77%
New Hampshire	-7.16%	-3.42%	-1.45%	-4.01%
Illinois	-3.66%	-3.63%	-5.50%	-4.26%
Texas	-4.23%	-6.95%	-3.68%	-4.96%
Alaska	-2.27%	-6.54%	-6.16%	-4.99%
California	-8.94%	-5.80%	-1.90%	-5.55%
West Virginia	-5.26%	-16.00%	3.57%	-5.90%
Tennessee	-14.39%	-8.25%	0.58%	-7.35%
Oregon	-13.25%	-3.58%	-5.28%	-7.37%
Utah	-9.33%	-6.79%	-11.23%	-9.12%
Maryland	-7.75%	-11.58%	-12.02%	-10.45%
Virginia	-6.26%	-11.01%	-16.21%	-11.16%
North Carolina	-9.52%	-11.31%	-12.68%	-11.17%
Pennsylvania	-9.47%	-11.70%	-13.11%	-11.43%
New York	-10.93%	-12.45%	-11.52%	-11.64%
Georgia	-8.37%	-13.47%	-15.15%	-12.33%
Missouri	-15.35%	-8.02%	-15.13%	-12.83%
Massachusetts	-14.97%	-16.24%	-19.24%	-16.82%
Arizona	-20.30%	-19.97%	-17.41%	-19.23%
Idaho	-29.01%	-19.09%	-17.69%	-21.93%
Hawaii	0.00%	-16.67%	-50.00%	-22.22%
New Jersey	-26.67%	-21.75%	-21.55%	-23.33%
District of Columbia	-35.71%	-25.00%	-31.03%	-30.58%
Louisiana	-61.30%	-19.67%	-19.00%	-33.32%
Connecticut	-31.28%	-34.12%	-36.10%	-33.83%
Rhode Island	-51.54%	-32.75%	-18.09%	-34.12%
New Mexico	-46.55%	-38.90%	-50.58%	-45.34%
Alabama	-44.23%	-64.34%	-64.84%	-57.80%
Mississippi	-37.50%	-100.00%	-66.67%	-68.06%

Figure 6. Secondary Migration Patterns of Refugees, FY12-FY14.

(Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement)

It is an imperfect method; the ideal data would be how many recent or long-term refugee arrivals have moved, compared to the entire recent or long-term refugee population, a number which

would then be more comparable to foreign- and native-born internal migration patterns.

Alternatively, tracking year-by-year cohort movements would also identify significant secondary migration patterns early on during an arrival period in which further groups from the same ethnicity or nationality are set to arrival; for example, continually assessing the movement of the recent Syrian refugee arrivals could establish patterns that would influence placement and integration efforts in the coming fiscal year.

By then taking the top five most popular secondary migration inflow and outflow states in FY2014 identified in Figure 6, where popularity = (number of secondary migrants) / (total migrating refugee population), and pairing that with additional data for each state from the FY2014 ORR report to Congress, we see that there is no macro correlation in the first year for refugees arriving in the U.S. between starting a job, wages earning, and health benefits available through work.

	<b>Entered employment (national average = 47%)</b>	<b>Wage (national average = \$9.59)</b>	<b>Health benefits (national average = 63%)</b>
<b>Most popular states</b>	<b>61.8%</b>	<b>\$9.54</b>	<b>65.8%</b>
Minnesota	62%	\$9.69	27%
Florida	38%	\$8.64	49%
Oklahoma	77%	\$10.23	96%
Wisconsin	57%	\$9.66	70%
Iowa	75%	\$9.46	87%
Arizona	57%	\$8.50	56%
New York	71%	\$11.00	25%
Georgia	35%	\$8.90	77%
Massachusetts	74%	\$10.21	89%
Pennsylvania	61%	\$9.29	78%
<b>Least popular states</b>	<b>59.6%</b>	<b>\$9.58</b>	<b>65%</b>

*Figure 7. Employment, Wage and Health Benefits for Top In- and Out-Migration States for Refugees, FY2014*

(Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement)

Furthermore, among the states most and least popular among migrating refugees in FY14, there is no clear marker among the governments measurable indicators for first-year success that distinguishes the best and worst performers; in fact, the average wage in the top five most attractive states (\$9.54) is 4 cents less than that in the five least desirable states (\$9.58). The average employment rate is less than 2 percentage points apart, and the number of refugees employed full time with health benefits is almost identical. This brief example shows that jobs and money do not alone drive refugee movement. Non-quantifiable factors, like family and friends, landscapes similar to a native country, and access to a line of work that is familiar, can be catalysts for geographic change as well. As Chapter 4 will address, dissatisfaction with

displacement and its offshoot, secondary migration, can be framed as both a problem, and a solution.

#### **Chapter 4: Secondary Migration as Problem and Solution: Towards Increased Agency in the Resettlement Process**

Anecdotally, refugees in Alabama, Florida, Maine and Tennessee have shared experiences of secondary migration with this author, sometimes four or five years after initial placement. Paired with appeals from refugee resettlement groups and government officials regarding the lack of resources to serve secondary refugee migrants, the 36-month survey period by ORR may not be sufficient to understand post-resettlement movement patterns. As Brown and Scribner of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops note in a 2014 journal article, “Secondary migration can exacerbate the pressures that promote backlash against refugee communities and it can increase the strain on local social service networks and resettlement agencies” (Brown and Scribner 2014). And despite extensive internal migration by refugees, refugees still struggle and never quite catch up to their non-refugee immigrant counterparts after initial resettlement; “the occupational level and subsequent rate of pay of these jobs are not equal to those of other immigrants,” notes Phillip Connor in a 2010 study proving the existence of the so-called “refugee gap” (Connor 2010). Moreover, of the foreign-born populations that stem largely from refugee cohorts, and are anecdotally tied to secondary migration, like the Somali community described by Huisman (2011) and the Burmese community discussed in the Lugar report (2010), there are in some cases poverty rates two- to three- times as high as the native and non-refugee immigrant populations. For example, the most recent U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 1-year estimates average overall poverty rate in the U.S. is about 12%; for the foreign born overall, it rises to 17%. But for members of the key refugee countries, poverty rates

skyrocket: for the Burmese, it's 28.9%; Iraqi: 39.4%; Sudanese: 40.7%; and Somali: 53.9%. The dispersion model implemented by USRAP "does not always work," Connor asserts, "since refugees often migrate to neighborhoods with other co-ethnics... Combining greater access to affordable housing in advantaged neighborhoods along with the educational and English policy suggestions previously mentioned could result in a mitigation of the refugee gap" (Connor 2010).

The Office of Refugee Resettlement admits: it tries to curb secondary migration, but it just does not know what the integration outcomes result from it.<sup>15</sup> The agency says it is working to develop a data system "that can track initial placements, secondary migration, resettlement services rendered, and performance indicators" (Office of Refugee Resettlement n.d.). But the reality is that, at least according to a 2011 GAO report reveals secondary migration isn't the only mystery to resettlement officials. "ORR's four assistance programs showed some success in helping refugees obtain employment in fiscal year 2009," the authors note, "but the percentage of program participants who obtained employment declined in recent years and little is known about which approaches are most effective in improving the economic status of refugees" (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2011). There is ample room to argue for improved data collection and analysis given these shortcomings.

Refugees' decision for secondary migration demonstrates strong self-determination in assessing the best environment for themselves and their families in which to thrive. This may be a step toward incorporation in their new home country, and has the effect of engendering "significant long term improvements in the overall health and well-being and employment prospects of

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<sup>15</sup> Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016: "...(T)he disruption from moving on a refugees' integration process is not fully known."

resettled refugees,” demonstrating refugee agency in asserting freedom of movement (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2002). However, it also combines with anecdotes about families waiting years to move to be closer with members of their ethnic community, media reports from cities where waves of secondary refugee migrants arrived unexpectedly and strain local services, and government reports mentioning the issue only briefly, all of which highlight a flawed system that does not seem to take steps to improve placement outcomes.

### **International Players**

UN agencies are regularly the first line in identifying refugees and processing their paperwork; UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration maintain field offices in the top refugee hubs, and make recommendations for best practices, including for resettlement. Though discussed at the abstract level in a handbook for resettlement, UNHCR, for example, acknowledges the benefit of improved refugee-community matching” and encourages placement processes that are “well coordinated so that the preferences of resettled refugees are observed wherever possible.” The question of the last clause, “wherever possible,” leaves the call for refugee choice open to interpretation on the part of more localized agencies. There are considerations like availability of affordable housing and jobs, and the resources of VOLAG affiliates in the U.S. cities where refugees are placed. But UNHCR goes further than the USRAP. “Resettled refugees who lived in a rural community in their country-of-origin may feel more comfortable if they are placed in a rural environment,” notes UNHCR in the resettlement handbook. “Where there is a large gap between the culture and prior life experience of resettled refugees and the receiving community, the presence of ethno-cultural community support will be particularly important.” The needs and wants of the Syrians, Burmese, Kurds and Somalis in placement may across ethnicities, socio-economic levels or education. In fact, UNHCR

highlights the importance of reunification with the greater community for Kurdish refugees, which is exemplified in the Nashville case discussed in Chapter 1.

UNHCR also identifies the correlation between “inappropriate placement decisions” and secondary migration, and goes as far as linking those to “loss of community and official support for refugee resettlement in the primary site, in other communities and at governmental level.”

This aligns with the example of the Burmese identified in the Lugar report - original matches that were insufficient consequently lead to animosity at the local level toward refugees and Burmese individuals.

One problem area for the UN refugee agency is the level of inclusion in decision-making. The organization advises that refugees may not have the contextual knowledge to make an informed choice about their placement; “Nevertheless,” UNHCR notes, “involving resettled refugees in placement decisions can help them to re-establish control over their lives, reduce anxiety and prevent placement being perceived as something done to or for them... due regard needs to be given to advance preparation and to ensuring that resettled refugees play an active role in placement decisions.”

UNHCR also advocates for integration programs that adapt according to lessons learned and the variable needs of refugee populations; that feedback loop must also include refugees in developing, carrying out and assessing those changes.

## **Integration**

The duty is on the U.S. government, then, to reconcile the right to freedom of movement, the logistics of resettlement, and the legal obligation to facilitate integration. The U.S. isn't alone in



struggle to balance these elements. The UN Human Rights committee noted in a Nov. 15, 2000, periodic report on Denmark that asylum-seekers there "are often restricted or discouraged from choosing a residence in specific municipalities or from moving from one municipality to another." It advises the country to verify that those measures comply with article 12 of the ICCPR. (ICCPR Human Rights Committee 2000). Similarly, in Germany, asylees may "apply to the authorities to be allocated to a particular town or district, but such applications are only successful in highly exceptional cases," e.g. if a rare medical condition requires that an asylum seeker has to stay close to a particular hospital, (AIDA: Asylum Information Database n.d.).

Secondary migration shouldn't be strictly seen as a burden on the receiving community, or on the refugee. It is an exercise in agency; and can benefit the secondary location economically with an industrious workforce. As Matthew Hall discovered from an analysis of longitudinal data, "immigrants benefit, both in terms of employment and earnings, from making interstate moves" (Hall 2007). It can happen as individual or group decisions. The Hmong study already called for expanded understanding of refugee decision-making, advocating for resettlement officials to understand that lineage groups -- which extend beyond the nuclear family -- may desire and choose to live with or near each other. "However well-intentioned prospective migration-related policies may be," the authors noted, "their chances of working effectively will be vastly increased if they are conceived and implemented with great respect for and consultation with Hmong desires and decision-making processes (Downing , Olney and Mason).

The questions surrounding secondary migration aren't the only ones to be resolved for improved integration outcomes. While "overhaul" is too strong, the current system demands changes - ones that would benefit refugees and their receiving communities. There are conflicting interests to balance. There is the refugees' agency and right to freedom of movement. There is the need for

coordination between federal and local entities to resettle refugees. And there is the long-term interest of integration, which in theory benefits both the refugee and receiving community. Ethnic enclaves can stifle new language acquisition, holding back job progress and wages” (Beckhusen, et al. 2013). Explaining these choices to refugees, and understanding their motivations to move, are a starting point to facilitating integration.

## **Conclusions**

The most recent data found herein hasn’t been analyzed or addressed in any academic literature; paired with a study of refugees in Canada, we can understand that secondary migration is not always a matter of following cheapest rent, or the best wages. There is something that is not being accounted for by the government when looking at refugee movement and integration. Secondary migration among refugees in the U.S. has occurred since the first years of the modern U.S. refugee resettlement program. But as this paper has shown, the government does not have a firm grasp on why it happens, what the patterns are, and how it affects integration - at least not in a way that they have publicly acknowledged; in doing so, they overlook an opportunity to encourage internal migration as a demonstration of agency, a tool for integration, and an exercise of human rights, rather than an encumbrance to the current program. The deficiency in the system has been sparsely documented, with no analysis of the numbers or trends; it’s a chronic problem the U.S. government has failed to mitigate for 36 years, with secondary migration levels at nearly the same rate over three decades, to the detriment of refugees and the communities in which they live. The government acknowledges that secondary migration is not only a regular occurrence but often complicating factor in resettlement and integration efforts; yet it has not directly addressed the root causes nor publicly acknowledged the absolute number of refugees who move within the country after their arrival.

Furthermore, by making financial resources contingent on the initial location, there is a de facto limit on the right to freedom of movement. The suggestion to attach funds to the person, rather than the location, could alleviate much of the financial complications tied to secondary migration. International organizations and governments decide for refugees what country they will go to, and subsequently, where they will live in that country. This supplants personal and communal decision-making, creates a false dichotomy of choice, and jeopardizes freedom of movement - when placement plays a crucial part in refugee well-being and economic success, consequently integration efforts, and also sets the pattern for future group migration.

One could argue that the U.S. resettlement program is working under the driving force of efficiency, without malicious intent to short-change refugees on services; a former ORR director said matching refugees to a location by work preference, for example, would be too complicated and time-consuming. And there is less resistance in accepting the status quo, in saying “here is better than there, and that should be good enough.” But does that uphold the legal obligation to facilitate integration, and uphold the freedom of movement? This paper has argued that the current system is not meeting those standards, and instead reinforces standard operation procedures of the international and national refugee systems. The country should instead move to dismantle the dispersion method and both retool the resources to be easily accessible by refugees anywhere, and allow greater refugee preference in the placement selection process. While politically, officials may favor a dispersion model to avoid the accusation of creating refugee enclaves, refugees ultimately are the decision-makers - accepting that need for community and social support and reframing it as a positive may go a long way to improving geographic stability and integration outcomes. The U.S. government should make secondary migration a priority issue and reframe the resettlement program through a more long-term approach to integration

that encourages choice in primary placement locations and also facilitates internal movement, rather than the current model which curtails agency, freedom of movement, and secondary migration. It could consider the following in moving toward more effective, rights-respecting and empowering resettlement through a two-pronged approach: improving data-gathering, and expanding refugee decision-making opportunities.

## **Data-gathering**

### *Expand the Annual Survey of Refugees to capture more data*

- The current method for tracking secondary migration, which uses social security numbers, does not extend past 36 months from arrival. But ORR conducts an Annual Survey of Refugees in which granular data could be collected on movement; the five-year, longitudinal-panel study on a sample of recent refugee households (who had lived in the U.S. between 8 months and 5 years)<sup>16</sup> could at the very least extend the data-gathering by two years to understand refugee movement in years 4 and 5.

### *Determine causes and effects of secondary migration*

- Ask refugees and resettlement stakeholders what they are seeing and choosing, and why; identify potential problem areas, like states or resettlement agencies that are consistently

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<sup>16</sup> “For each member of refugee households that responded to the survey, the ASR collects basic demographic information such as age, country of origin, level of education, English language proficiency and training, job training, labor force participation, work experience, and barriers to employment. Other data are collected by family unit, including information on housing, income, and utilization of public benefits.” (Office of Refugee Resettlement n.d.)

seeing out-migration, or certain refugee cohorts that are moving earlier, faster, or farther than others.

## **Decision-making**

### *Enable choice in primary placement*

- Provide information as early as possible on likely destinations for resettlement to allow refugees lead time on researching and establishing contacts with family and friends, to glean information from formal and informal networks.

### *Reframe secondary migration as an opportunity to demonstrate agency and reclaim the right to freedom of movement*

- Working with UN agencies and VOLAGs, create a pilot program that expands refugee choice, while honoring the established affiliate network. Include data on schools and neighborhoods, rent costs, climate, religious facilities, mental health services, short- and long-term job opportunities, available benefits, public transportation, and training and classes available. By creating a market from which refugees can choose, they are again being allowed to take control of their lives and their futures.
- Rather than recreating the FASP program from the 1980s, incentivize refugees instead of the agencies to move to certain areas with cost-of-living adjustments, or job-and-skill matching availability; open this up to be a group decision as well. This may also encourage certain religious and ethnic communities, for example, to take a bigger role in sponsoring new refugee arrivals; it could also lead to “benefits shopping” and subsequent

out-migration once the incentives run out, but by clustering refugees and appealing to their interests in work or climate

*Explore funding forward, not retroactively*

- A common complaint from resettlement agencies is the lag due to funding allocations being calibrated based on the previous three years of arrivals, not the anticipated arrivals for the coming year. Assessing secondary migration patterns will allow federal officials to anticipate pockets of arrivals and departures among certain refugee cohorts.

*Actively identify and support secondary migration patterns*

- At the first signs of secondary migration, brief community leaders and officials about the facts of refugee resettlement and what best practices are. Place temporary government or VOLAG coordinators in situ on short-term TDY to collaborate with secondary refugee migrants and service providers, and troubleshoot school, healthcare and training issues.
- Create evaluation forms or checklists to review transition considerations with would-be movers; include reflective questions about available support systems, quality of life issues, and practical matters like housing and school proximity at the destination.
- Provide information to refugees considering out-migration about destination choices and potential resources for resettlement benefits, healthcare, schools and jobs.

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